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ABSTRACT

The author sees a contemporary worldwide crisis in the nature of authority. Faced with the disintegration of the old forms, parents and children are grasping for some form of stability. Working from the premise that the patriarchal sense is deeply rooted in us all, the author sees a need to develop new concepts of authority which will support mankind's search for personal and societal growth. The author contends that attempts at participatory democracy have proven largely abortive and proposes that new representative procedures be developed within all our institutions. (Author/WM)

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You are indeed an extraordinary convention group to appear on a Sunday morning for one more rhetorical homily. Since the theme of your meeting is "Putting Rhetoric to Work," the real hope for me as for any Sunday morning sermonizer lies in what you may be prepared to hear.

As superintendents, principals, and college administrators, we have probably heard as much or more radical rhetoric in the past decade as any social or professional group in the country. For many of us, the shock effect of the four-letter word attacks and the blitz effect of the non-negotiable demand demonstrations were a comparatively short-lived smokescreen for two very different realities: 1) the very real causes and concerns of groups left out of and alienated from our power structures, and 2) the zealots and charlatans who found these causes and concerns the material for their own messianic missions.

As educators, we made our own contributions to some of the once radical rhetoric. -Innovation, encounter, community control, self-renewal, inductive were written large in our lexicons of the 60s.

But radical rhetoric, whether it be that represented by the four-letter words and non-negotiable demands of dissidents or the proddings to the establishment of educational provacateurs, quickly loses its power to provoke and to move. We get surfeited with the rhetoric and the rhetoric gets dissipated because it is all too quickly co-opted to describe the most traditional, even reactionary attitudes and positions. Those of you who shared in reading the first and second wave of proposals for Title I and Title IV grants submitted to the Office of Education in the mid-sixties know how quickly the grant-writers learned how to describe programs in the new idioms.

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Radical rhetoric is first perceived as extreme, quickly appropriated by very middle-of-the-road positions, and gradually assimilated to the point of dissipation. Radical change is a far different phenomenon, and often moves at a snail's pace. The change, is, I believe, most seriously hindered by very divergent fears in our national point of view. On the one hand, we Americans see ourselves as children of the land of opportunity, of rising expectations and achievements, of progress and ever-expanding frontiers. As individuals and as groups we want to be proud of our

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particular heritages as well as of national heritage. As individuals and as groups, we reach out for the new opportunities even as we are defensive about the new groups who may be challenging a piece of the turf on which we began our homestead so short a time ago. The realization that openness and opportunity have been rooted in our heritage compels us to speak in favor of them even as we try to appropriate the rhetoric to defend the status quo which we see as necessary to protect our investment in the homestead. Who will serve the haves in the style to which they quickly become accustomed if the have nots go on becoming the haves?

The ambiguities faced by all of us in an open, plural world are very real. I am convinced that only in facing them as real ambiguities can we hope to go on resolving them even as we perceive new forces and new ambiguities developing in the decades ahead.

Consider, for example, the ambiguity in our use of the word radical. Dictionaries continue to give as the first definition rootedness, the derivation from the Latin radix meaning root. The later connotation of extreme change, even discontinuous change has at times become the dominant connotation. It is not at all surprising that the ambiguity about the meaning developed.

The root always grows and therefore changes. As a single species, the plant seeds itself within the range of the species and replicates its growth in fairly stable patterns. But the history of biological evolution, even in its partial clarity, is a history of cross-breeding, of hybrids, of new species and new identities.

I believe we would basically agree - at least at this point in time - that plants and animals do not reflect about the history of their evolution--that rational man is the first species within this development able to reflect about his past and his potential future in becoming. We are, we know, literally rooted in, radically a part of continuity. We fight to defend that continuity. We see stages of that continuity as identity. One day, I believe, we will see those stages as picture frames in the moving film of milleniums. But the frames are important. They define points in individual lives and in the histories of groups, and institutions, and peoples. Without that definition, without that identity, perceived in the short-term geneology, I believe we are moorless, unable to cope with the partialness, the limitedness of being human--each of us an infinitesimal piece in infinitesimal time.

The Old Testament expressed geneology in concrete terms: Adam begat a son and called his name Seth; and Seth begat Enos and Enos begat Cainan...

A family tree representing a biological unit, an ethnic group, an historic nation, or a religious denomination provides that kind of concreteness, stability, identity. We are aware that within the genus, there is cross-fertilization, grafting on of new elements. We are sometimes humorously aware that our great-great grandfathers would have been disoriented, shocked, and indignant had they been able to forecast some elements of our present life styles. But, even as we chuckle in retrospect, we seldom have the sense of humor, the espousal of our own limitedness in time and space, the basic humility to realize that we are not-and probably should not-be able to put the future in a trust fund to protect our descendants from themselves--to ensure that they will develop in our own image and likeness.

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Central to our dilemma at this juncture of history is, I believe, the fact that we are experiencing an almost world-wide crisis in the very nature of authority. Families, tribes, ethnic cultures, religious groups, nations and empires developed their authoritative systems over periods of time. But once they reached a plateau of development, of definition, of "maturity", they became patriarchal in structure and conservative in thrust.

The old patriarchial forms are crumbling all around us and each of us in his own way has at times been involved in toppling the kings, in fleeing the patriarchs, in asserting personal freedoms and rights to self-determination. Even as we rejoice in the new freedoms, we share some of the uneasiness of living in a world which seems often to provide no moorings for us or for those around us.

Faced with the disintegration of the old forms - faced with the overt denial from all sides of "My country right or wrong; my church right or wrong; my father right or wrong," the governors and the governed, the priests and the faithful, parents and children grasp for some stability, some identity, some semblance of trustworthiness in our lives.

How often have you asked or been asked "Is nothing sacred anymore? Have derision and distrust become the stock and trade of almost all human relationships? Are heresy and blasphemy the only reactions of honest men to authoritative systems?"

What has become of authority and reverence in our time? Sons and daughters talk of love and disdain their parents. Throughout the sixties, we citizens carry peace symbols, decry violence, and manufacture bombs in basements of fashionable brownstones. We witnessed editors of college newspapers scoff at the uses of presidential power and demand that those presidents cure the ills of higher education --- and often the ills of society --- by presidential fiat. In the tumultuous decade following Vatican II in my own church, we have watched the Catholic Left revolt against absolute authority and petulantly chide the hierarchy for not taking absolute positions on social issues. At the same time, the Catholic Right championed infallibility and threatened to secede if the Church authoritatively modifies her position on birth control.

But whether we were participants or observers in these or other tensions, I suggest that we all must realize that the patriarchal sense is deeply rooted in us all. In almost all societies, from primitive tribes through the history of Western civilization, the father or the father figure was always responsible for the flock. The benevolent patriarch was obeyed and revered if he maintained a stable community and succeeded in providing a degree of personal freedom and dignity for his subjects. The malevolent patriarch was obeyed and feared if he maintained a stable community and shackled the personal freedom of his subjects. Order is necessary to a functioning society - and patriarchs have always in some way believed that they must save the people from themselves - and from each other.

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Modern man, I believe, is schizophrenic about patriarchal authority. He has progressively thrown off the dominance of the patriarchal figure even as he clings to the security and the potential power of the authority symbol. He continues to attempt to throw off patriarchial domination, but he begs or demands that the patriarch dominate others for his own personal or group good. If we are to cope at all with this schizophrenia in ourselves and others, I believe we must consider two very distinct notions of authority: the authority of control and the authority of personal persuasion and influence. I am convinced that the two were deliberately confused, almost identified in the history of Western man. In the tribal community, the regulatory authority of government-the authority of limed control-and the traditional teaching authority-the authority of persuasion and influence-reinforced each other. The Holy Roman Empire (vast as it was in size and influence) remained a tribal community from this point of view. Closed societies have always depended on a common value system, on an acceptance of some form of revealed truth, on a conviction that if a man is to be responsible, he must be absolutely certain, even be somehow divinely inspired. The ability to keep the society intact, a recognized identity depends to some degree on the effectiveness of the closure. It is not an accident that totalitarian states have iron curtain

But, modern transportation and communications systems, travel, the printed work, the media, universal education have opened and will continue to open every closed society, the old world of sectarian culture curtains and the recurring world of iron curtains and censorships. Every opening brings confusion and insecurity, distrust, derision--even cynicism and despair.

Yet, I insist, disagreement need not breed distrust. Dissent need not foster nor depend on derision. Heresy and blasphemy are necessary positions only if one assumes that to disagree partially with one's tradition, it is necessary to reject it and to denounce it.

Regulatory authority--the authority of limited control--will, I believe, always be necessary and desirable in any functioning society-family, church, school, nation. To the degree that I am honestly and functionally dependent on a person or an institution, I must be reasonably subject to their regulations. If I choose to transfer the dependency or to assume independent responsibility, I free myself of the prior regulatory power. I may try to influence the policies of Con Edison, of New York Bell Telephone, and of The New York City Sanitation Department as a citizen, but I have no desire or ability to assume the responsibility for electricity, telephone service, or garbage disposal in my daily life.

Our teen-age sons and daughters may influence the life-style of our household and family, but they have neither the desire nor the ability to assume the personal responsibility for their own bed and board at this time. I do not believe in pretending under these circumstances that they are equal partners with us in the regulatory responsibilities of the household and the family. Economic independence is a powerful key to personal freedom and we must explore every possible avenue of opportunity for college-age "children", wives, and dispossessed citizens to gain a measure of economic independence that allows them responsibile options for their economic choices.

I can never be wholly or even largely independent of regulatory authority in my daily life unless I choose and find a way to live a hermetical life in the twentieth century. I, personally, reject that option as a regressive and powerless form of independence.

The attempts to develop what has been called participatory democracy have been largely abortive. The devotees of one man (or one woman) -- one vote have, I believe, erred to the point of calamity in believing that complex institutions can function in the "town meeting" decision-making of small New England communities. Rather, they have again taken the very old form of the committee structure --- with the formidable power of the committee veto --- and multiplied it over and over by creating layer after layer of new groups able to use the power of veto on any and every issue. In the attempt to liberalize, to humanize the faceless crowd dominated by the big brother of bureaucracy, we have time after time used the old form of veto -- then repetitive vetoes -- to bring the new bureaucracy of so-called "equal partnership" to a grinding halt.

New representative procedures must be developed within all our institutions. Democratic institutions must be representative of the constituents they serve.

Authorities, charged with the limited power of control -- be they persons acting as administrators or groups acting as regulatory committees -- must be accountable to the constituencies they serve. That accountability must be real in that the constituencies have a real degree of power to influence and to rectify the pattern of actions of the regulators. But if the power, by design or by usage, becomes the effective power of one-to-one veto, there can be no accountability for actions and, I maintain, in the end, very little action at all.

In the old orders children were to be seen but not heard, and all subjects -- sons and daughters, wives, members of churches, college students, even citizens -- were seen as children.

In developing open societies, all mature and maturing persons must be seen and in some way heard. Representative governments must define and continually redefine limits of responsibility and power and develop a fundamental respect for that usage even as on operating use of man and humankinds continuing attempt to learn to live and make life livable.

Within that framework, I would insist that we must always be subject to, partially controlled by regulatory authority within our institutions.

But what of the authority of personal persuasion and influence? My father, my husband, my bishop, the President of the United States are not divinely inspired; they are not absolutely certain; they are limited, fallible men and so am I.

I reverence their opinions, but I can never be dominated nor enslaved by them. The mature scholar has always consulted his authorities with respect and reverence and then arrived at this own thesis, sifting, editing, rejecting and espousing from the views of his chosen authorities and, if possible, in dialogue with them. The mature father and son, the mature husband and wife, the mature President and his people, the mature college president and his community, the mature bishop and his people must develop such an attitude about the authority of personal persuasion and influence.

Reverence is the capacity to accept our father's limitations, peculiarities, absurdities along with his insights, experience, and concern. Only then are we truly free of our fathers; free with the mature ability to accept and reject, free to dissent and to revere, free to espouse the identity of our origins and of our becoming.

Personal insecurity is part of the human condition. We seek to escape it by asking others to assume it for us. Man has sought that security in dogmatic religion, in absolute monarchies, in scientific expertise, and more recently in neo-mysticism and in drug cultures. We will continue to create a series of fallen idols of non-heroes, of plaster saints if we need to believe that our authorities are more than limited, fallible men. The very expectancy breeds the resultant cynicism, disdain, derision, and despair.

We see it in the dilemma of the indulged but dependent "child" whose derision of the teaching authority of the parents is strongly correlated to his delayed adolescent dependence on them. I believe it is very similar to the frustration and resentment of the indulged wife who comes more and more to depend on the indulgence and to reject the dependence. There are, I believe, analogous causes and behavior patterns in the clerical, governmental, educational and corporate worlds.

Only if we can begin to see the causes, the complexities, the paradoxes, the ironies of our frustration can we hope to develop new concepts of authority which will support mankind's search for personal and societal growth in; the future. If that search is to be fruitful--even possible--it will need courage and humility; it will need skepticism and reverence; it will need a sense of purpose and a sense of humor

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